

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*

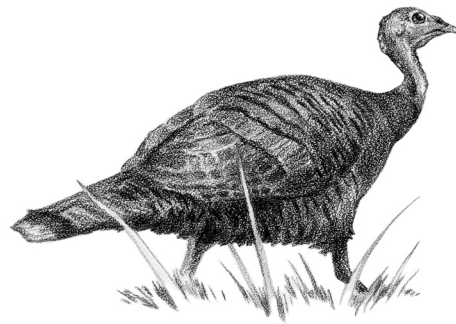


Folk Name: Gobbler, Eastern Turkey

Status: Resident

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Large hardwood and mixed hardwood forest patches; also forages in fields along forest edges



The history of the Wild Turkey in the Carolina Piedmont dramatically illustrates the impact mankind can have on the natural environment; both good and bad. The Wild Turkey was once abundant in the Carolinas. The bird was a staple of the American Indian diet, and it has remained a favored prey of bow and long gun hunters since European colonization. The English explorer John Lawson described his experience hunting turkey while traveling near Charlotte in 1701: “At Night...we saw plenty of Turkies, but [they were] pearch'd upon such lofty Oaks, that our Guns would not kill them, tho' we shot very often, and our Guns were very good. Some of our Company shot several times, at one Turkey, before he would fly away, the Pieces being loaded with large Goose-shot.”

Later in his travels, Lawson's group would spot “gangs” of hundreds of turkeys at a time, and, after a while, his men had eaten so many turkeys that the taste of turkey meat became “loathsome” to them. So, to mix things up, they hunted and ate possums, and they shot beavers and ate their tails. They considered both of these substitutes to be excellent dishes.

Charlotte physician J.B. Alexander reported that during his boyhood (ca. 1840) “wild turkeys were very numerous” in Mecklenburg County, and he shared his recollections of how turkeys were hunted at that time: “[There was] not much trouble catching them in pens after the manner of catching partridges in coops. The most common way [though] was to build a turkey-blind, have them baited, and shoot them with a shotgun. I have known a half-dozen killed at one shot.”

In the mid-1800s, a voracious market developed in large eastern cities for wild game including: turkey, geese, quail, deer, and rabbits. In 1846, the Salisbury *Carolina Watchman* newspaper noted that American game was even being advertised for sale overseas in the London *Times*: “saddles of American venison, wild geese, from the American lakes, and wild turkey from the American forests, just received in fine order.” Overhunting and loss of forest habitat for both agricultural purposes and development, soon resulted in a rapid decline in the population of the Wild Turkey throughout the eastern United States.

In North Carolina, the Wild Turkey population dramatically plummeted by the 1870s. In 1873 and 1874,



The Charlotte Observer published two accounts of what were likely some of the last indigenous turkeys hunted in Mecklenburg County:

“A wild turkey weighing 18 pounds was on exhibition yesterday at the door of ‘Our House.’ It was killed yesterday morning near Sugar Creek Church by Mr. Winslow Ferriss.” —May 13, 1873

“Mr. John Farris killed a splendid wild turkey on Sugar Creek, a few days ago. He sold it to Mr. S M Timmons who feasted his boarders on it.” —April 22, 1874

The public began to cry out for the protection of turkey and other birds, and in 1875, the North Carolina legislature passed a law designed to prevent “the wholesale destruction” of many types of birds in the state—including the Wild Turkey. The law established a hunting season and stipulated fines for violators. Mecklenburg, Rowan, and Anson counties were 3 of the 11 counties in which the law first took effect. Cabarrus County was added several years later. For the Wild Turkey, however, it was a case of “too little too late.”

In 1877, Dr. William Closs wrote: “It is true that turkeys are now becoming very scarce in this section [western North Carolina] and if citizens continue to kill them this species of fowl will soon be extinct.” Two years later in Chester County, SC, Leverett Loomis reported the population of the Wild Turkey had been rapidly declining over the past decade, and he predicted the bird would “ultimately be exterminated by the hunters.” Unfortunately, Closs and Loomis’ predictions soon became a reality. In 1908, Dr. Alexander of Charlotte, reported he had “not heard of one being taken in the county in twenty years,” and he lamented that “[t]he old-fashioned wild-turkey, that was prized so highly a half century ago, is now extinct.”

By 1920, overhunting and habitat loss had resulted in the demise of this iconic game species from 18 of the 36 states in which it was native, and, by 1940, only 40,000

Wild Turkey were estimated to survive in the wild in the entire United States. State wildlife departments began work on restoring turkey through a combination of habitat management and reintroductions. State biologists released birds in Mecklenburg and surrounding counties in the late 1930s, but the local flocks failed to become established. In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson wrote:

In three generations of hunters consulted[,] there have been no Wild Turkey records for Mecklenburg County, though some attempt is being made to establish a few birds. Mr. H.C. Rucker reports there have been two groups of wild turkeys in one section of the county since 1939 at least, and that the State released more in 1941 in that section.

Restoration work made slow progress over the next 30 years. Between 1940 and 1970, the presence of Wild Turkey in the region grew very slowly, and in Mecklenburg County, the status of the bird was alternately described as “very rare,” “a few introduced birds,” or “no recent records.” During the 1970s, harvest data collected from the Piedmont of North Carolina indicated the reintroduced population of Wild Turkey had continued to gradually increase. That decade, hunters harvested fewer than 20 birds annually in all but one county. Harvest records indicate fewer than five Wild Turkeys were taken in most North Carolina counties each year from 1974 to 1978, but the population continued to steadily grow.

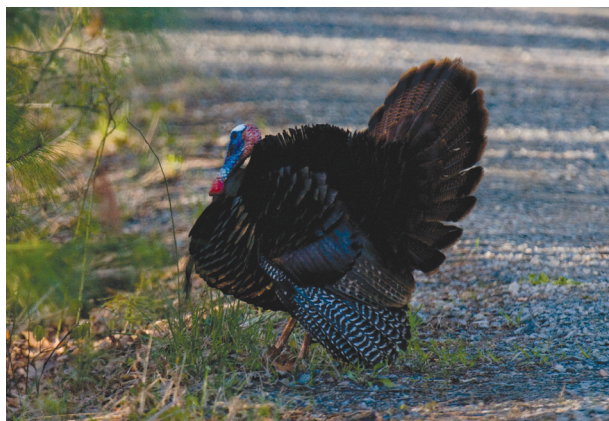
By the late 1970s, the reintroduction of the Wild Turkey in the region finally began to take hold, even in the more heavily developed areas around Charlotte. In 1979, Patrick Cummings of Charlotte sent this letter published in *Wildlife in North Carolina* magazine:

Dear Sir: I am 12 years old and the first day of turkey season this past spring, my brother and I walked down a dirt road towards the river. Every hundred yards we would stop and listen. It wasn't long before we heard a turkey gobble about a hundred yards

away. We called, but the turkey would not answer. About an hour later, a crow came over cawing and we heard the turkey gobble. My brother told me to try to go around him, but I guess the bird heard me. Later that morning, I heard it gobble again; it was going away from us. After lunch, I went down the same dirt road and sat down where I heard him last. About 15 minutes later, I heard something moving through the brush. I saw two turkey heads moving through the grass. The first one started moving away from me. So I called. The second one turned around and I saw a small beard, so I shot twice and had my first turkey. He weighed 15 pounds.

By 1980, national restoration efforts were deemed successful in 48 states with an estimated two million Wild Turkey having been reintroduced. From 1946 to 1999, more than 5,000 Wild Turkey were relocated at over 325 sites in North Carolina, resulting in a population of over 100,000 birds. Efforts at reintroduction continued in the Central Carolina region, and the population slowly grew. State wildlife personnel released 15 turkeys in a wildlife food-plot area at McGuire Nuclear Station in Mecklenburg County in 1996. Not long after, Wild Turkey began to be regularly seen a few miles south at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge, and successful breeding has regularly occurred there since.

Today, due to the assistance of man, a breeding population of Wild Turkey now exists throughout the Central Carolina region. Once again the loud gobbles of the bearded tom turkeys can be heard echoing in local forests each spring, as they strut about fanning their tails, displaying, and drumming for all the hens. Turkeys are now being seen in fields and forested areas and even in some suburban subdivisions throughout the region. In 2001, a pair of Wild Turkey was found during count week of the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count—the first ever recorded on this count—which has been held annually since 1941. Flocks of more than 30 birds have been seen in Mecklenburg County. Unfortunately, habitat



*A male displaying at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge.
(Jeff Lemons)*



*Wild Turkey nest at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge.
(MCPRD Staff)*

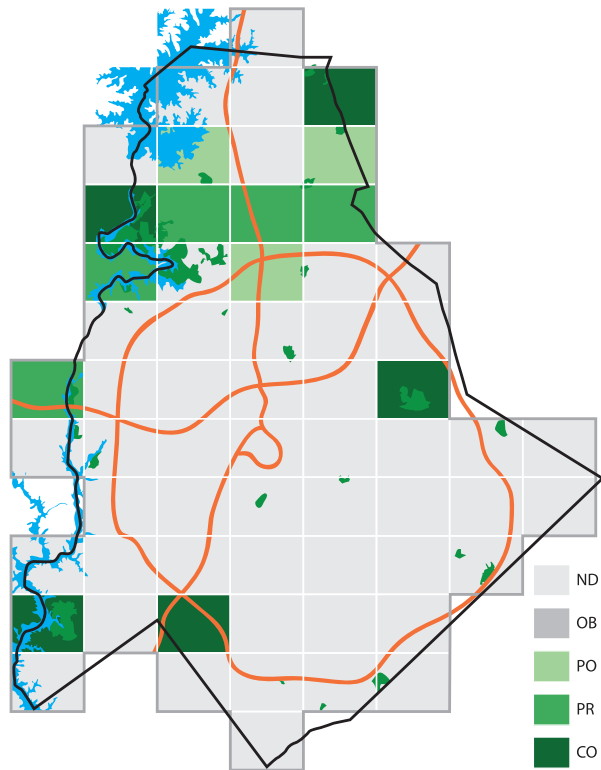
destruction, habitat fragmentation, illegal poaching, and the predation of eggs and young by various predators, all continue to loom large as threats to the long-term health of our reestablished turkey population.

Nest notes: In recent years, many turkey nests have been accidentally uncovered at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge while staff were conducting resource management work. Often the hen would refuse to flush. Unfortunately, several times the female abandoned the nest. These nests were carefully examined. All nests were completely concealed in dense vegetation. All eggs were laid directly on the ground in a circular depression lined with a small amount of dead plant material and a few feathers. Two of these nests were discovered during the first week of May. One clutch had nine eggs, and one clutch had eight. One active nest at Brackett Bluff Nature Preserve had eight eggs on 25 May. A nest found on 3 July had six eggs.

Spotlight on Local Research: Summer Brood Survey and Gobbling Survey

It takes lots of hard work to determine the population of birds in the wild. Staff from the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department have participated in several types of studies to census local turkey populations periodically since 1998. One of these, the Summer Brood Survey, was coordinated by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. The numbers of gobblers, hens, and poults were counted at known breeding sites during July and August. The project was designed to develop a productivity index to determine average poult to hen ratios for different regions of the state. Data collected provided insight into both overall nesting success and poult survival.

A second survey, the Gobbling Survey, was conducted for several years at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge and Latta Plantation Nature Preserve. This study systematically counted calls of gobbling turkeys to determine the number of adult male turkeys present annually so that a population trend could be assessed. The male turkeys were stimulated to gobble by using either recorded Barred Owl hoots or turkey hen calls.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/5, CO/5)